

AESTHETICS AND THE NATIONAL INTEREST*

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Just as auto-makers start tooling up for a new model about two years ahead of time, commencement speakers start revving up for June graduations about six months in advance. So I was delighted when President Fawcett invited me to address you today, because I had been drafting in my mind a ringing commencement speech. It was entitled "Peril and Promise," and it said that now you are standing on the shores of the vast Sea of Life and will have to navigate these uncharted waters without the help of your parents, professors, and other old salts who have gone before you. The speech noted that the Sea of Life is fraught with challenges and dangers, and it ran only 47 minutes.

Unfortunately, President Fawcett pointed out in his letter of invitation that "We always suggest to our speakers that their remarks be limited to about twenty minutes." So you will not get the "Peril and Promise" speech today. I think you ought to remember, as you say good-bye to Columbus, that President Fawcett stood up for your interests to the very last minute of his jurisdiction over you.

Since you are confronted with the United States Commissioner of Education, you will not be surprised to learn that the alternative topic I have chosen has much to do with education. Specifically, I wish to talk about the state of the humanities and the arts in our culture, the ways in which we might extend their values to every part of our society, and your role in doing exactly that. Certainly it is a major function of

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education to foster humanistic values, to help create the kind of social and intellectual climate in which the aesthetic sense will flourish. And yet, I believe, our educational system is failing to discharge this function with anything like the imagination and ingenuity the task deserves.

You may wonder why I raise this matter on a day which signals, for many of you, your last formal encounter with formal education. I do so because education in this country has always been run by citizens, and since most of you are 21, you have the right to help run it along with all the other voters. You are going to pay for it, and the day will come when you have a normal curiosity about what is being done with your tax dollars. Further, a number of research studies have shown that college-educated men and women have a tendency to get married. Most of you, in sum, are going to wind up being parents if you haven't reached that joyous and frustrating state already. Your children will consider being over 30 years old as only a little better than being dead, they will find many of your beliefs and preferences vastly amusing, and they will regard you as quaint mementos of a bygone age, like valentines from the 19th century. Despite their disdain for your views, you will care about them very much. Hence you will care about the schools and colleges they go to and about the values these institutions transmit.

Speakers who take up the cause of the humanities and the arts these days tend to polarize their thinking. By that I mean they seldom limit themselves to encouraging our artistic and cultural achievements. They must at the same time disparage our 20th century love affair with science and technological gadgetry. They affirm the spirit of humanism, but in a

manner which makes it sound as if humanism is somehow opposed to the spirit of science.

It is obvious that we have placed far greater emphasis on the contributions of science in our time than on the contributions of the arts and humanities. The scientific and technological revolution has in our lifetimes been a dominant, energizing force in our society. It has created much of our wealth, helped develop and sustain our prominence among the nations of the world, and created a host of new jobs and skills while making many others obsolete. In short, it has usually been in the national interest as well as in the individual interest to support the things of science, because they are useful and necessary to the human condition in the Twentieth Century.

But this support of science has also forwarded the arts and humanities. The artistic and cultural renaissance which many believe is developing across the country today owes much to scientific and technological achievement. Mass production and distribution have made the products of artistic endeavor available to larger audiences. More people attend cultural events today than did 25 years ago, if for no other reason than because there are more automobiles and busses and subways to get them there and more television sets to get the events into their homes.

I do not mean to suggest that technological progress alone can be credited with the 40,000 theatrical groups, the 1,400 symphony orchestras or the 5,000 museums which exist in the country today. But at least some of the 300 million visits by Americans to those 5,000 museums last year were assisted by technology. Furthermore, the host of new cultural centers themselves reflect, to some extent, the achievements of the new

technology -- not to mention the potential, still only partially realized, of the new artistic media represented by television and the motion picture.

In the field of education, we are beginning to face up to the new technology and explore ways of using it; I believe it's time the artist and humanist did the same thing. Some critics see grave dangers in the production of art for large masses of people. One has called this "the triumph of masscult," claiming that art for the masses doesn't have even a theoretical chance of being good because it must be watered down to the lowest common denominator of popular taste.

As a democratic optimist, I do not agree. Certainly technology has resulted on the one hand in the mass distribution of a great deal of pseudo-artistic junk. You can go into any large drug store today and find "paintings" for sale at about the same price you pay for a case of beer, and much of this stuff -- those ersatz paintings of Paris, for example, with the gaslights reflected on the rain-slick pavement, and a gendarme on a bicycle -- much of this stuff really ought to be mounted for use as dart-boards.

But so what? You can also buy -- for the same price, and often in the same place -- reasonably good reproductions of excellent art. People who, 25 years ago, would never consider attending a symphony do so today because inexpensive recordings brought good music into their homes and gave them an appetite for more. The same publishing technology which prints and distributes eminently forgettable trash also supports good writers who would not otherwise have a sufficiently large audience to keep a roof over their heads and a ribbon in their typewriters. The

educated minority of a century ago bought an awful lot of junk, too. Nor do I find persuasive the argument that the popular success of culture-trash must necessarily drive fine work from the book-racks and record-stores.

If we are to be concerned about the quality of popular taste, then, we should not worry about the technology which has made both good and bad art so widely available. Rather, we should worry about the process by which taste in the humanities and arts is formed, and that process obviously includes the teaching offered in the schools and colleges. Our educational institutions have accepted their responsibility to inform the intellect and communicate knowledge; but I believe that they have failed in their responsibility to shape taste, in any area but that of literature and that they could do better with that.

Unless the schools of our Nation change in the years before your children start first grade, your children will be shortchanged in the learning skills and appreciation which represent man's most civilized efforts. Although there are exceptions to this statement, in the main it is an accurate appraisal of current practice in our public schools, which seem to regard as "frills" any serious and consistent programs in art, music, drama, sculpture, and dance.

We do slightly better in our colleges and universities -- but even here, I believe, there is more shadow than substance. Our liberal arts tradition makes a cafeteria of arts and humanities courses available to students. But mounting pressures from what we call "practical" or "professional" education either drive students away from these studies or else change the nature of the studies so that they serve aspirants for Ph.D. degrees rather than the broad interests of a liberal education.

This is especially the case in the education of teachers. Unless they have the chance to develop familiarity and ease with the humanities and the arts, there is no reason to expect them to convey an aesthetic sense to their future pupils.

If the artist and the values he represents are as important as we profess them to be, what can you and I do to make the formal educational system more receptive to his work and point of view?

For one thing, we can involve more of our artists -- present and future -- in the process of education. In the term "artists," I would include sculptors, dancers, actors, designers, architects -- all those concerned with making the world in which we live more meaningful, more visually and aurally exciting. At the elementary and secondary levels, this would doubtless mean waiving some of the traditional requirements for teacher qualification. It would mean allowing professional artists to work in the schools to teach both students and teachers; and at the same time, learn from the teachers what they know about children and educational growth.

At the college level, I think we must make the artist-in-residence a member in full standing of the academic community, not a kind of curious exhibit. Why do we say "artist-in-residence" at all? The physicists, the economists, the historians, the university doctor, the football coach, the dean of men, and the president are most surely "in residence." This term "artist-in-residence" to me suggests the university's intuitive suspicion that the artist does not really belong here; he is considered a bird of passage, likely to be startled by sudden noises or the well-meaning attempts of administrators to feed him.

There is, of course, ample reason for this institutional intuition that the artist does not really "belong" on the campus. Usually he doesn't have a Ph.D., and usually he does not display the least tendency to get one. He does not have the normal credentials for teaching in a university, and he frequently displays eccentricities which annoy the trustees.

Here the obvious problem is with the credentials and the trustees, not with the artist. If educational institutions continue to claim, as they do now, that shaping the aesthetic sense is among their goals, they must welcome the practicing artist to their campuses. They must, moreover, involve him in the education of all interested students, not merely in the instruction of the artistically talented.

I speak of the artist in the singular, but these same observations hold for groups of artists, such as companies of actors. Colleges and universities should work out new relationships with such groups, inviting them to make the campus their performing home, and at the same time giving the entire student body a new sense of what the creative artist is about. While they are about it, colleges and universities must abandon the second class citizenship they assign to the arts when they make them in large part a non-credit, extracurricular function.

Finally, we should make the university environment congenial for the future artist, as well as for the active professional. This means revising the college admissions process. As now practiced, this screening rewards the academically talented high school student at the expense of the artistically talented. College admissions requirements and the achievement tests that help admissions directors make their decisions

rarely reflect any interest in non-academic, artistic pursuits. A high school student with a genuine and obvious talent for painting rarely receives any credit for this talent from college admissions officers. The most you can say about his artistic ability is that it won't positively hurt him -- as long as he got a "B" average in everything else, including driver-training and personal hygiene. The notion that the aesthetic sense is crucial to the quality of a person's future life, and hence to his education, is not reflected in the standard admissions process today. Moreover, the effect of the admissions process spreads downward into our high schools, which adjust their curricular offerings to those matters colleges care about. A would-be Michelangelo might have a chance if he can play football. Otherwise he'd better forget about college.

All these observations may strike you as the ramblings of an educator worrying about his narrow, personal concerns -- a speech, in brief, better suited to a faculty convention than to a commencement exercise. And yet a concern for aesthetic values has a direct bearing on your future lives, and a lack of it in enough Americans has made a great difference to our present lives.

It would be possible for you to spend your next forty or fifty years in an atmosphere of increasing ugliness and tastelessness -- and not minding. Or it would be alternatively possible for you to recognize the problem and do something about it. All of you will be taxpayers. Many of you will be members of a Parent-Teachers Association. A large number of you will be school board members. And some of you will be active in education as teachers or administrators or college trustees. In all these roles you can shape attitudes toward the artist and his relation to education.

than finding the lowest cost per square foot. It would mean taxpayers who believe that if we're going to put up public housing, we might as well do it right, and erect handsome structures that will still be good-looking 20 years from now, rather than replacing slum tenements with a more modern slum. It would mean citizens who believe that architecture can appropriately go beyond putting up a glass-and-steel box with some Greek nymphs out in front spouting water out of their mouths and holding concrete cornucopias filled with plaster grapes and cement pineapples. It would mean, in sum, a generation of Americans with a sharpened sense of taste and a concern for excellence in every aspect of their lives.

Perhaps for some of you -- particularly those young men shortly expecting greetings from the local draft board -- concern for aesthetic values may seem remote and perhaps irrelevant. Our attention is more immediately drawn to the frustration and violence that beset our cities at home and the dangerous and demanding struggles that confront us abroad. In such a time of conflict, there is always the risk that the essence of civilization will be a casualty.

And yet it is man's expression of the civilized and the beautiful that makes the pain and sacrifices of conflict endurable. It is this expression that gives us a sense of continuity with the best in our past and a new vision of the future. At a time in our history when we confront dissention and violence at home and abroad, we had best remember to preserve those elements of art and thought which constitute mankind's noblest achievements.

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